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ABSTRACT

This study explored why students attempt to please their teachers, the link between the self-reported desire to please teachers and academic performance, and the various ways students go about the task of pleasing teachers. The research focused specifically on the range of reasons students have for wanting to please teachers, what students do to please teachers, whether behaviors change when students like or dislike a teacher, and if some teacher behaviors might lead students to want to please teachers. The subjects were 22 high school students representing various socioeconomic and ethnic groups and varied achievement levels. The students were divided into six focus groups; nine discussion questions were used to focus the discussions. Eight reasons emerged as to why students try to please their teachers: (1) students' upbringing; (2) access to future help such as scholarships or letters of recommendation; (3) to show respect; (4) to maintain high esteem in teacher's eyes; (5) to receive confidence building feedback; (6) to stay out of trouble; (7) to stay on the teacher's good side; and (8) to make the grade. Specific ways students tried to please teachers included both academic and non-academic behavior. Behaviors of teachers that would lead students to try to please them included: helping with school work, providing positive confidence-building feedback, doing unnecessary things just to be nice, respecting and trusting students, and demanding less work. The findings suggested a link between the quality or amount of effort students will put forth on academic tasks and liking or disliking teachers, as well as a possible link between multiple goal theory and student teacher relationships. The nine focus group questions are appended. (ND)

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Pleasing the Teacher: A Qualitative Look

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Pleasing the Teacher: A Qualitative Look

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If a teacher hates you...they re not going to try their hardest to give you the grade you need to pass.

If you might please a teacher, they might treat you better than if you don t please a teacher.

It s not fun going into class first hour with a teacher that doesn t exactly like you. It s bad enough having to wake up and go to first hour, but to a teacher that doesn t like you in your first hour, thats even worse.

The above quotations were extracted from a dialogue among four high school students. The exchange expresses concerns that these students harbor about pleasing their teachers, not being liked by teachers they don't try to please, and the belief that being liked by the teacher may lead to improved grades. In the following discussion we expand on these concerns, focusing on why students attempt to please their teachers, and the various ways they go about the task of pleasing the teacher.

We undertook this project to shed light on an empirical link between self-reported desire to please the teacher and academic performance. Research by Miller, Greene, Nichols, and Montalvo (1994), working from a multiple goals format (Ford and Nichols, 1991; Maehr, 1984; and Wentzel, 1991, 1993) identified pleasing the teacher as a potentially important predictor of academic striving. Their findings suggest that pleasing the teacher may be linked to academic achievement through self-regulation, effort, and persistence. The scale used by Miller and his colleagues (1994) to assess pleasing the teacher consisted of several items reflecting social responsibility and social approval for doing work (Wentzel, 1991). We felt that these social responsibility goals, such as being dependable and compliant, may only partially explain pleasing the teacher. Specifically, we wanted to know (a) the range of reasons students may have for wanting to please the teacher, (b) the things students do to please the teacher, (c) if behaviors change when students like or dislike a teacher, and (d) if there are behaviors teachers display that might lead students to want to please them.

Method

We began the current study with the assumption that student backgrounds and attitudes toward school vary tremendously. Thus, we anticipated a wide range of responses from students. And, although our intent for this study was not to generalize, but only to identify as much information about the nature of pleasing the teacher as possible, we felt that our sample should include students from various socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds as well as varying levels of achievement in school. Our sample was purposively selected with these factors in mind.

Data Source

Twenty-four high school students from the mid-south were selected to participate in one of six focus group sessions to discuss their views on pleasing the teacher. Of the twenty-four students selected, two were unable to participate in their scheduled session due to failure to return parental consent forms. The largest focus group included six participants while the smallest group included only two.

The focus group format was chosen over other methods because of the potential to yield rich information. Research by Folch-Lyon and Trost (1981), and Ward, Bertrand, and Brown (1991) indicates that focus groups can provide a good forum for gathering large amounts of data, and that the method can provide results comparable to survey techniques. The exploratory nature of the study lent itself well to the efficiency of the focus group method.

Procedures

The focus group sessions followed the recommendations outlined by Folch-Lyon and Trost (1981). Participants were informed that the discussions would be audio taped and that no one from their school would be allowed to listen to the tapes or read the transcripts of the discussions. We anticipated that students would relate pleasing the teacher with liking the teacher, and that this could lead the sessions away from the intended focus, so the moderator explained that pleasing the teacher was different from liking the teacher. In addition, the participants were informed that individual teachers should not be named during the discussions. The moderator then guided the session by asking a series of pre-established questions about pleasing the teacher. Students were allowed to comment freely in response to each question and build upon each others' comments. Throughout the discussion, the moderator was responsible for keeping the group focused on the topic questions or issues, and to identify questions that may have been overlooked in the planning phase. We recognized the potential problems of social desirability and conformance pressures that can be inherent to focus groups. These risks were minimized by allowing the students to talk in terms of what kids in general might think or do regarding pleasing the teacher, rather than insisting on personal attitudes and beliefs. Each session lasted 40 to 50 minutes.

Protocol

We used a set of nine questions to guide the focus group discussions. The questions were designed and organized to get a general feel for students' beliefs about the importance of pleasing the teacher, and to identify behaviors that students display when trying to please a teacher. We also believed that in many cases teachers may behave in ways that are more likely to lead students to try to please the teacher, so we added one question related to student perceptions of teacher behavior. The questions can be found in Appendix A. During the first group session the moderator noticed that responses to question 4 -- What kind of things do students do if they want to please the teacher? -- were related to academic and non-academic behaviors. We had not anticipated two types of responses, so in the following sessions the questions were modified and asked twice so that students could respond first about academic behavior and then later about non-academic behavior.

Data Analysis and Findings

The focus group sessions were recorded on audio tape and later transcribed. A margin coding technique (Bertrand, Brown, & Ward, 1992) was used to code relevant comments made by the participants. Transcripts of the first session were analyzed with initial responses from each question becoming initial categories. Responses on the subsequent transcripts were categorized using a constant comparison of categories (Glasne & Peshkin, 1992) from each set of transcripts.

Why Aim to Please?

Before discussing the reasons students gave for trying to please the teacher it should be noted that some participants felt they did not try to please their teachers, but only tried to please themselves. It did not matter to these students whether the teacher was pleased with them or their work. However, most of the participants felt that high school students in general try to please their teachers in some way. Eight reasons emerged as to why students try to please their teachers:

- Raised that way
- Receive help in the future (scholarships, letters of recommendations)
- Show respect
- Maintain high esteem in teacher's eyes (You want then to be proud of you)
- Receive confidence building feedback
- Stay out of trouble
- Stay on the teacher's good side
- Make the grade

The participants also suggested that students tried to please the teacher in a large variety of ways. We have broken the list into academic related behavior and non-academic behavior issues:

Academic Behavior

- Turn in work on time
- Turn in completed assignments
- Follow instructions
- Do extra credit
- Go the extra mile on assignments (type papers, spend more time on assignment)
- Always do home work
- Pay attention in class
- Join academic clubs (could be considered non-academic)

Non-academic Behavior

- Get along with them (the teacher)
- Don't act up
- Offer to do things for them
- Help out in/out of school (run errands, grade papers, wash their car, baby-sit)
- Compliment them
- Make comments about how hard you work
- Bring them things (donuts)
- Talk with them out of class
- Do things with them out of school (parties, fishing, church)
- Ask them for advice
- Develop a personal one-on-one relationship with them

Almost all of the participants felt that trying to please the teacher could make a difference in a grade, but that it depended on the teacher. There seemed to be a general consensus that it could lead to an improved grade or help maintain a good grade, especially when the grade was borderline. One session indicated that pleasing the teacher *should not* make a difference in a student's grade, but the teachers were human and it does make a difference.

We were also interested in whether the above behaviors changed if students liked or disliked a teacher. The groups indicated mixed beliefs. Apparently, some students do not try to please teachers they dislike, and some do. "It depends on the teacher." Students who dislike the teacher, but try to please the teacher anyway do the same things as students who like the teacher, but the difference seems to be in the amount of effort they put forth, and the quality of their work. Some students indicated that if they did not like the teacher they would turn their work in on time, but it may not be correct. On the other hand, when the students like a teacher and want to please them, they put extra effort into their assignments, have a positive attitude, and try to be more friendly with teachers.

What do teachers do that lead students to try to please them?

We were able to identify five behaviors that the groups believed would lead to pleasing the teacher:

- help with school work
- provide positive confidence building feedback
- do unnecessary things just to be nice
- respect and trust students
- demand less work

The groups were very specific about teachers going out of their way to help with assignments, and providing positive, informative feedback that pointed out areas for improvement. Students also indicated that when teachers do things that are unnecessary, like have class outside, students are more willing to please them. They also felt students would try to please teachers who trusted their classes and respected their students. With the last area, the groups felt that students were more likely to try to please teachers who were less demanding. However, they gave no indication that these teachers were more lenient, only that these teachers spaced the workload, so that students did not feel overwhelmed.

Discussion

The current study provides a great deal of information about high school students wanting to please their teachers. The findings show that high school students do have a variety of reasons for trying to please the teacher, and that they go about it in a variety of ways. This is not surprising due to the emphasis placed on evaluation in educational settings. Some of the results reveal an orientation consistent with Wenzel's (1991) social responsibility goals, e.g., being dependable and compliant. Furthermore, an orientation reflecting Maehr's (1984) social solidarity goal, where students work to be seen as a good student, was found. The findings of the current study extend the knowledge base by suggesting a link between the quality or amount of effort students will put forth on academic tasks and liking or disliking a teacher. Furthermore, the results may provide us with a link between multiple goal theory and student teacher relationships. Future research may want to: a) examine individual differences in pleasing the teacher to see if low and high achieving students try to please the teacher in different ways, b) examine the relationship with other goals and achievement variables such as learning, performance, and other social goals, as well as effort, persistence and self-regulation, c) explore the developmental

differences in how students at different grades attempt to please their teachers, and d) examine the interaction between teacher attitudes/behavior and pleasing the teacher.

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Appendix A

Focus Group Session Guide

1) Do kids your age try to please their teachers?
2) Do students think it is important to please the teacher?
3) Why do you think kids would want to please the teacher?
4) What kinds of things do students do if they want to please the teacher?
5) Does it make a difference in a student's grade if they want to please the teacher?
6) What kind of things do teachers do that make students want to please them?
7) Would their ever be a time students would try to please the teacher even if they didn't like the teacher?
8) If student's don't like the teacher, what kinds of things do they do to please the teacher anyway?
9) If students like a teacher, what kinds of things do they do to please the teacher?